

# Quality Criteria for Interpretive Research in Information Systems: A Reflection on Klein and Myers' set of Principles

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**Abstract:** In the last two decades, interpretive research has become more established and more popular in information systems (IS) field (Walsham 2006), (Walsham 1995a). Publications with detailed information and practical guidelines for conducting this type of studies have contributed to grow confidence in interpretive methods, as for example (Walsham 1995b), (Walsham 2006), (Myers 1997), and (Klein & Myers 1999). The work of Klein and Myers (1999) consists of a set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive research, which provide fair and appropriate criteria for judging the validity and reliability of such studies. In this article we focus on understanding how this set of principles has informed research articles published in the highest-ranked IS journals (according to Association of Information Systems): Management Information Systems Quarterly and Information Systems Research. We question if these principles have been translated into common practices when conducting interpretive research in the field of information systems and whether authors incorporate them explicitly when they communicate the results of their research. Articles published in these two journals are recognized as finest exemplars of rigorously conducted research and thus represent a relevant sample for this exploratory study. This work can be extended in the future to include more journals. This research is empirical and the analysis is done at the level of articles published in those two journals. We browsed the entire collection of articles published in these journals between 1999 and 2009 and selected research papers reporting field studies of interpretive nature. Selected articles were read, with particular focus in the methodology section, and explicit or implicit evidence of quality criteria that informed the research was collected. Direct or indirect reference to Klein and Myers' set of principles was highlighted. We summarize and compare our findings in a comprehensive table, and note that, apparently, the principle of hermeneutic circle is the most explicitly discussed in this sample. Moreover, Klein and Myers' set of principles seem to have had a greater influence in Management Information Systems Quarterly publications, where several articles illustrate the compliance with such principles with examples. This is particularly visible in the papers published in the period from 2002 to 2006. This study aims at contributing to the literature of qualitative research methodology in information systems field, and provides a reflexion about methodological rigor in interpretive research that, to our knowledge, had ever been done. Thus, the findings here presented may be useful for junior researchers and doctorate level students to understand how validity and quality criteria are enacted in high-quality research.

**Keywords:** interpretive research evaluation, quality and rigor criteria, information systems, Klein & Myers' set of principles, hermeneutics

## 1. Introduction

Research in information systems (IS) has had a long positivist tradition. However, qualitative research methods, in particular interpretive studies, have been gaining their own place within IS research community, spurred by serious and valuable contributions under various themes that have been published in past decades. The problem of rigor and relevance of interpretive research is central in the debate about using appropriate research methods in the IS field because interpretive researchers often face misjudgements about the rigor of their research, as they are sometimes required to satisfy criteria that are not adequate to their genre of interpretive research (Sarker 2007), (Klein & Myers 1999).

The paper entitled "A Set of Principles for Conducting and Evaluating Interpretive Field Studies", by Klein and Myers (1999) is a significant contribution to the topic of quality and validity criteria for interpretive research in IS field. Several pieces of interpretive studies have been published since. We collected a sample of high-quality interpretive research papers published after 1999 and assessed the methodological rigor and quality criteria concerns that have driven the researchers. In doing so, we highlight the explicit reference to Klein and Myers' set of principles, the implicit form of the principles in the report, and any other quality and validity criteria cited by the authors.

This work aims at contributing to the literature of qualitative research methodology in IS area, in particular interpretive studies. The interested audience are junior researchers and doctorate level students that intend to undertake interpretive fieldwork. Our contribution provides an informative account of how authors of these top-quality journals conceive methodological rigor when communicating their research and how Klein and Myers' (K&M) set of principles are enacted. This

reflection can help junior level researchers develop a critical view of their readings by having as a reference this sample of high quality articles.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the next section discusses quality and validity criteria for conducting and evaluating interpretive research in the context of IS literature. In section 3, we explain the methodology for this article, that is, how did we get to the results. Finally, we discuss the results in section 4.

## **2. Quality and validity criteria for interpretive research**

The concerns of validity and quality of a research contribution are not exclusive of interpretive research. To establish credibility and validity of a research study for an audience is necessary to demonstrate care in reporting, which is both a matter of argumentation style and accuracy of methods used (Walsham 1995b). The justification of methodological approaches is often done on the basis of criteria utilized or developed by very experienced researchers in particular methods, disciplines or strands of thought. For example, the dimensions of authenticity, plausibility, and criticality (Golden-Biddle & Locke 1993) that ethnographic texts are required to develop in order to create a convincing argument.

Another example is the set of principles proposed by Klein and Myers (2009). These principles explore the role of hermeneutics, anthropology and phenomenology in eliciting knowledge from interpretive studies. Adherence to the principles does not guarantee interesting results *per se* but, instead, they are useful for orienting the conduct and report of interpretive research and “can also be used for post hoc evaluation” (Klein & Myers 1999, p.71). However, they advert that researchers should not apply them mechanistically but reflect how and if they are useful to any particular project. The principles overarch the research process and provide tools for understanding the problem studied as a whole. Therefore, the resulting report will very likely be plausible and convincing.

The hermeneutic principle is a fundamental meta-principle, and the other six principles are in its dependency. The principles are as follows (in numerical order) (Klein & Myers 1999): the principle of hermeneutic circle; the principle of contextualization; the principle of interaction between the researcher and the subjects; the principle of abstraction and generalization; the principle of dialogical reasoning; the principle of multiple interpretations; and the principle of suspicion. These principles are not to be thought of in a bureaucratic way but instead in the spirit of fundamental ideas that embed insights from relevant strands of interpretivism, such as hermeneutics and phenomenology, and also from the authors’ experience with anthropological research.

Even though a thorough description of each principle can be found in the cited work, we next explain briefly each one. The fundamental meta-principle is the hermeneutic circle, which suggests that human understanding is achieved by iterating between the interdependent meaning of the parts and the whole they form. The parts and the whole can be at various levels, as for example different levels of observations (researcher and participants) and their shared understanding, various historical and social aspects and the whole perspective of the context, and also the partial understanding resulting from a study and the relation with the whole of the extant literature. The principle of contextualization thus follows from this idea, in that an explanation of the situation under investigation requires a critical understanding of the social and historical aspects.

The principle of interaction between the subjects and the researchers suggests that there should be a critical reflection of how research materials were socially constructed through the interaction between researchers and participants. On the other hand, the principle of abstraction and generalization recommends that researchers relate the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation to theoretical and more general concepts. Furthermore, the principle of dialogical reasoning cautions that there should be sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical framework guiding the research and the actual findings. The sixth principle underscores the sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations of the events under study among the participants, and the principle of suspicion follows from this one in that the researcher should also be sensible to possible biases and distortions in the narratives collected from the participants.

The methodological rigor of interpretive research is a concern that has lingered among qualitative IS researchers. Hence, the aforementioned set of principles was received with enthusiasm and, in many cases, included in the mandatory readings for doctoral-level qualitative research courses. Therefore, it

is reasonable to expect that future interpretive research would incorporate the principles as a reference work. This is what we wanted to confirm with our study and we report our findings in the next sections.

### **3. Methodology**

The work of Klein and Myers (1999) has had a significant impact in IS research community and accounts for an impressive number of citations in for example Google Scholar: more than 2300 citations in January 2012. Thus, we wanted to learn about its influence in the two most reputed journals of IS research (according to the ranking of Association of Information Systems): Management Information Systems Quarterly (MISQ) and Information Systems Research (ISR). In the next section we explain how we sampled the articles and in Section 3.2. we provide a detailed account of our study of these articles.

#### **3.1 Bibliographical search**

We limited the bibliographical search to a ten-year period (1999 - 2009) and to MISQ and ISR journals because they are representative of highest-quality research in the IS area. We acknowledge this limitation and contend that this work, being exploratory, may be extended in the future in order to include a larger sample of journals. As the set of K&M' principles addresses only the quality standards of interpretive field studies, we selected only articles reporting this type of studies, that is ethnographic or case studies of interpretive nature.

Articles were collected from EBSCO database, where a filtering search was first done with the terms "interpretive field studies" in full text. This search retrieved 36 articles. We perused all 36 articles and discarded conceptual or opinion articles. Then, we read thoroughly the methodological section of the remainder articles and categorized each article according to the authors' description of the methodological approach. This categorization was validated and discussed between the two authors of this paper. Articles categorized as positivist case studies, critical research, and mixed methods research were then discarded. Thus, our bibliographical search resulted in 8 articles from MISQ and 6 articles from ISR reporting ethnographic or case studies of interpretive nature. Table 1 provides the details of each article and our comment on the quality and validity criteria evoked or implied from the report. For the sake of readability, articles' details are displayed sequentially.

#### **3.2 Examination of articles**

Interpretive research articles are typically long and dense. In our case, the articles in the sample have an average of 23 pages length. We learned from the examples provided in Klein and Myers (2009) how to identify the principles in the narrative. Some articles are not explicit about any validation or quality criteria that informed their research and we tried to infer them in an implicit form, as Klein and Myers (2009) explain. Furthermore, we complemented our analysis with the operationalization of the principles as explained by O'hEocha et al. (2012), which is based on questions derived from keywords in Klein and Myers' article.

**Table 1:** Details and methodological criteria of sampled articles

<b>Article 1</b>	(Choudhury & Sabherwal 2003)
Research Method	Multiple case study
Research Site	1 diversified services company; 1 financial services firm; 1 software manufacturer; 1 large county in Southeast US; 1 large food product firm
Focus	Evolution of portfolios of control over the duration of outsourced information systems development (ISD) projects
Main Contribution	New insights for the use of portfolios of control in the clients' perspective
Methodological criteria	The report does not refer explicitly to Klein and Myers' criteria. The analytical process is described as interpretive and an explanation of the data analysis process is provided together with the reflection of how the findings relate with the known literature, adding parallels, differences and new questions.
<b>Article 2</b>	(Schultze & Orlikowski 2004)
Research Method	Ethnographic field study
Research Site	A bricks-and-clicks dot-com that uses self-serve technology
Focus	Implications of inserting self-serve technology into embedded relationships at the inter-firm micro level
Main Contribution	Managing the complementarity between relationships and IT in practice is fraught with tension at the micro-level with negative consequences for business strategies

Methodological criteria	The intellectual basis of the research is clear and mindful of the findings being contradictory with some established theories. Moreover, the article examines alternative views and notes different values and opinions expressed by strategic and tactical teams. Authors do not refer explicitly Klein and Myers' set of principles.
<b>Article 3</b>	(Levina 2005)
Research Method	Ethnographic field study
Research Site	Web-based application development project
Focus	Understanding the actual collaborative practices on multiparty ISD projects, and how the diversity of professionals involved influences the system being designed
Main Contribution	Theoretical constructs to understand the cycle of multiparty collaboration on ISD projects
Methodological criteria	Strong in terms of theory building, generalization and reasoning. Multiple viewpoints are critically presented. Refers to an inductive, grounded fashion way of developing theory. Does not refer explicitly to Klein and Myers' set of principles.
<b>Article 4</b>	(Sarker & Sarker 2009)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Multinational high tech organization
Focus	Understanding how agility is developed and enacted in a globally distributed ISD team
Main Contribution	Development of an empirically grounded framework of agility in ISD settings and identification of some actionable tactics for enhancing agility within such settings
Methodological criteria	Authors refer specifically to Klein and Myers' set of principles in the methodological section and illustrate with examples from how they conducted the study. In the same section, they refer also other methodological considerations and cite other authors, namely (Bryant & Charmaz 2007), (Charmaz 2000), (Flick 1998), (Myers & Newman 2007), and (Patton 1990).
<b>Article 5</b>	(Vidgen & Wang 2009)
Research Method	Multiple case study
Research Site	Two software development teams
Focus	Study the factors that enable or inhibit agility in agile software development
Main Contribution	Framework for the organization of agile software development
Methodological criteria	There is no explicit reference to Klein and Myers' set of principles. The study is accounted as interpretive and we could find implicit evidence of principle of abstraction and generalization and principle of multiple interpretations.
<b>Article 6</b>	(Vaast & Walsham 2009)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	French Public Health Administration
Focus	Practice-based learning dynamics that emerge in networks of practice
Main Contribution	Formulates a model of trans-situated learning supported by an information infrastructure
Methodological criteria	Authors acknowledge that the study was informed by the set of principles of Klein and Myers, and explain that the data analysis was made in consideration of the principle of abstraction and generalization, principle of hermeneutic circle and principle of suspicion. We could also find implicit evidence of the other 4 principles.
<b>Article 7</b>	(Davidson 2002)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Health care insurance company in Eastern United States
Focus	Requirements processes in organizations and the socio-cognitive basis of power in ISD
Main Contribution	Develops a socio-cognitive process model of how frames and shifts in frame influence sense-making during requirements identification on ISD projects
Methodological criteria	The researcher provides an appendix with criteria for assessing the quality and rigor of her work, where she directly refers to Klein and Myers' set of principles and to criteria used in ethnographic texts, namely authenticity, plausibility, and criticality (Golden-Biddle & Locke 1993)
<b>Article 8</b>	(Pawlowski & Robey 2004)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Large manufacturing and distribution company based in United States
Focus	The role of IT professionals in internal knowledge transfer, in particular as knowledge brokers
Main Contribution	Formulates a conceptual framework that shows the conditions, practices and consequences of knowledge brokering by IT professionals

Methodological criteria	We found explicit reference of Klein and Myers' set of principles in the method section another section entitled "evaluation", where the authors provide a reflection about their conformance to established principles for evaluating interpretive research. Besides demonstrating the strengths of their work in terms of adhering to some principles, as for example the hermeneutic circle, they also account for how the work could better reflect the principles of multiple interpretations and the principle of suspicion.
<b>Article 9</b>	(Backhouse et al. 2006)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	British standard in information systems security
Focus	The influence of exogenous contingencies for the creation of a de jure standard and reflection about the power mechanisms required for a standard to evolve
Main Contribution	Deep understanding of how human, social and economical aspects influence the development of a standard and theorization about power circuits
Methodological criteria	In the research methodology section authors provide a table with their reflection of how they validate their interpretations in the light of Klein and Myers set of criteria.
<b>Article 10</b>	(Hanseth et al. 2006)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Norwegian hospital
Focus	The intended and unintended consequences of the implementation of a standard for an electronic patient record
Main Contribution	Demonstrate the socio-technical complexity of IS standardization and the related disorders created by multiple actors that generates reflexive mechanisms and undermine the creation of a standard
Methodological criteria	Authors acknowledge that Klein and Myers' set of principles informed data analysis and collection and illustrate with the fundamental principle of hermeneutic circle, though without naming it. We could find implicit evidence of the other principles.
<b>Article 11</b>	(Puri 2007)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	A district situated in the rain-shadow zone of peninsular India
Focus	The importance of knowledge alliances between multiple knowledge systems in order to support effective development and implementation of a GIS to address the problem of land degradation in India
Main Contribution	Provides an articulation of the concept of building knowledge alliances across communities of practice and broadens the concept of boundary objects
Methodological criteria	Author cites Klein and Myers' set of principles but does not elaborate explicitly on any particular principle. We could find implicit evidence of the principles in the report.
<b>Article 12</b>	(Davidson & Chismar 2007)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Hospital in US
Focus	Interaction between changes in social structures of an institution and changes in technology to engender alignment
Main Contribution	Uncovers two processes of institutionally-triggered changes and one process of technology triggered change related with the implementation of a computerized physician order system
Methodological criteria	The article elaborates on how the authors applied the principle of hermeneutic circle and refers to Klein and Myers' set of principles. The other principles were not explicitly illustrated in the report, but we could find them in an implicit form.
<b>Article 13</b>	(Levina & Vaast 2008)
Research Method	Case study
Research Site	Large multinational, financial services firm headquartered in United States and Western Europe that outsourced projects to Russia and India
Focus	How differences in organizations and countries give rise to boundaries and status differences in offshore ISD projects and what practices alleviate these differences to establish multiparty collaboration
Main Contribution	Theory-based practice framework that explains how boundaries and status differences limit collaboration effectiveness in offshore ISD and the key role of on-shore middle managers in engaging others in shared practices
Methodological criteria	The article refers to Klein and Myers' set of principles but does not explicitly particularize any principle. We could imply from the report that the principle of interaction between the researchers and the subjects was applied to improve inductive theory. Authors also refer that the principles of grounded theory informed data collection and analysis.
<b>Article 14</b>	(Olsson et al. 2008)
Research Method	Multiple case study

Research Site	Irish sites of two large companies based in United States
Focus	Investigates and develops a theoretical model of the dual bridge role in a two-stage offshoring relationship
Main Contribution	Theoretical model that illustrates the off-shoring bridge model, where companies differ in terms of their approaches to team integration, organizational level implementation, and site hierarchy.
Methodological criteria	The principle of dialogical reasoning and the principle of multiple interpretations are explicitly evoked. Moreover, the principle of abstraction and generalization is clearly demonstrated in the description of the approach to data collection and analysis. The principle of interaction between the researchers and the subjects can be implied from the account of how the data was collected, and the principle of suspicion is demonstrated through quotes. Other criteria, besides Klein and Myers' set of principles, are also explicitly justified and demonstrated namely reliability, construct validity and external validity.

#### 4. Discussion

In Table 2, we summarize our detailed assessment of quality and validity criteria in the articles. This process had two phases: in the first phase, we examined carefully all articles and registered our impressions about the methodological criteria reported by the authors for each article (see Table 1). We also registered, (in Table 2), explicitly evoked principles (X) and any other criteria (yes (Y) or no (N) when no other criteria was referred). In the second phase, we did a comparison among the articles in terms of the type of implicit support we could find for each principle: either strong implicit support (S), or weak implicit support (W) and registered the results of that comparison in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of results

Principle	Art. 1	Art. 2	Art. 3	Art. 4	Art. 5	Art. 6	Art. 7	Art. 8	Art. 9	Art. 10	Art. 11	Art. 12	Art. 13	Art. 14
Hermeneutic circle	W	S	S	X	W	X	X	X	X	S	S	X	S	S
Contextualization	W	S	S	X	W	S	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	W
Interaction	W	S	S	X	W	S	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	S
Abstraction & generalization	S	S	S	X	S	S	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	S
Dialogical reasoning	S	S	S	X	W	S	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	X
Multiple interpretation	S	S	S	X	S	S	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	X
Suspicion	W	S	S	X	W	X	X	X	X	S	S	S	S	S
Other criteria	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y

Legend: W – weak implicit support; S – strong implicit support; X – explicitly evoked; Y – yes; N – no. Our results seem to show that Klein and Myers' set of principles had a greater influence in the articles published in MISQ (art. 7 to 14), specially in the period shortly after the publishing of K&M' article, where we can find several articles that explicitly state their conformation to that set of principles. These articles usually provide a highly structured explanation in the form of a comprehensive table or an annex where they justify their methodological considerations and provide examples for each principle.

Another finding is that the principle of hermeneutic circle is, individually, the most cited and explicitly developed by the authors, probably due to its fundamental nature and overarching importance for interpretive research. On the other hand, the principle of dialogical reasoning, the principle of multiple interpretations and the principle of suspicion are also individually cited and demonstrated with examples in some articles, but we could not find any particular justification for this fact other than random occurrences.

In terms of the implicit form of the principles, we found that the principles of abstraction and generalization and the principle of multiple interpretations can be implied in all articles. Indeed, the articles examined strive to generate a theoretical contribution that builds on the extant literature and to convey multiple accounts of the events under study. Conversely, the principle of contextualization is sometimes disregarded and minimized in the reports as some authors describe the case sites very broadly and do not provide a critical account of the historical context.

Finally, a curious aspect is that three researchers authored more than one study in this sample of articles. In this respect, we could find some regularities in their reports. For example, articles number 3 and number 13 do not explicitly refer any K&M' principle but acknowledge the adherence to grounded theory principles. Articles 7 and 12 are a different example. In this case, the author explicitly refers to K&M' set of principles, but the most recently published article only explains how the hermeneutic circle was applied and does not delve into the other principles. Finally, articles 6 and 13 also share one author but in this case we could not find a salient pattern in the report style.

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